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THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE.

VOL. XII.—OCTOBER–DECEMBER, 1899.—No. XLVII.

EARLY AMERICAN BALLADS.

OWING to the recency of collection, the history of old English ballads is conjectural. At the time when ballads were first issued in the form of broadsides, printed in black letter, literary taste had already outgrown this species of composition. While many fine old ballads were thus circulated, the greater number of those supplied by the press were of new invention, and characterized by a puerility of rhythm and expression, in sad contrast with the music and tragic force of the ancient compositions. In the remoter parts of Great Britain histories continued to be cast into ballad form, generally with the result of offering a very prosaic and degenerate form of verse. There are no direct means of determining the time at which the taste of refined persons turned to a more sophisticated kind of poetry, and at which, consequently, the popular ballad, left to the mercy of the less educated and thoughtful part of the community, became a survival instead of a living art. In accordance with data offered by the ballads of Denmark, where collection was earlier and fuller, one might guess that this change took place about the end of the fourteenth century, and that most, if not all, of the extant English narrative songs which possess much literary merit belong to an earlier date. At a later time, the persistency of tradition still maintained among the people the ancient treasure.

During the sixteenth and succeeding centuries, however, the production of popular ballads by no means ceased ; such songs continued to be made in numbers. But these were inferior in excellence, even when corresponding in theme ; the decline is readily accounted for by the consideration that the authors were now men of the people in contrast to men of letters, whereas in the earlier period the best minds had so occupied themselves. In place of the kings and great lords, whose fortunes had made the theme of the early songs, the hero might be a captain or a major, the heroine a farmer's daughter ; the scope and dignity of the story suffered reduction. Of these later narrations, many were brought over to the New World, and

still others composed on American soil. With a few exceptions where the subject was historical, these more modern ballads have remained uncollected; perhaps such neglect involves no great literary loss, but as illustrating popular taste and folk-life the ballads have their curiosity. In this article will be brought together a few of these contributed from various sources; very likely the publication will bring to light a whole crop, for the number of such songs current in the early part of the century must have been considerable. At the present day, similar ballads are sung chiefly in isolated mountain districts, in North Carolina or East Tennessee; but these survivals correspond to like histories formerly well known in the New England and Middle States.

With regard to local ballads Dr. W. M. Beauchamp writes as follows:—

“The colonists of New England were fond of long and doleful ditties on local themes; and part of one of these has haunted my mind for years, perhaps because of a mock discussion on its true reading. It commenced, —

On Springfield mountains there did dwell
A comely youth, known full well,
Leftenant Curtis' only son,
A comely youth just twenty-one.

One day this lovely youth did go
Down in the meadows for to mow;
He had not mowed half round the field
'Fore a pizen sarpint bite his heeld.

“When in Springfield lately, I sought for information on the old song, but found only one young man who knew about it. It was his father's favorite, but as the son was sung to sleep by it of course he did not know the whole. So I am ignorant on which of the Springfield mountains the lovely youth dwelt, or in which of the meadows he went for to mow.

“On my return home a friend had rescued another ballad for me, written on time-discolored paper, with an antique British watermark, being evidently the ballad in the handwriting of its author. It is entitled, —

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE AWFULL & SURPRISING DETH OF THE CHILD OF DANIEL & SARAH BECKWITH, WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE JUNE YE 20TH DAY, AD, 1773.

1. my frends allow my febel toungue,
if I may speak my mind,
this plainly shoes to old and young
the frailty of mankind

2. the child that in the wods retiar
is lost while parants moarn,
and othars are consumd by fiar
or into peses toarn.
3. permit my febel pen to rite
what has ben laitly dun,
a man who plast his cheaf delight
in his beloved son.
4. in manchester whare he ingoys
provision for this life,
he had two dafters and three boys
by his beloved wife.
5. his second son, robbens by name,
was ten years old and moar,
on him this sad distruction came,
who was in peses toar.
6. the fathar said, my children thair
if you will clear sum land,
you shall posess all it doth bair
to be at your command.
7. the parants then did both agree,
to tinmouth took their way,
a moarning sister for to see,
but long they did not stay.
8. the prity boys, wee understand,
did lovingly agree
all for to clear the peas of land
set fiar to a tree.
9. the chunk was thirty feat in length
and was exceding dry,
so rotten it had not much strength
did burn most vemantly.
10. the boys against a log did lean
or on it setting all,
and nothing was for to be seen
untill the tree did fall.
11. but oh, alass, the dismall blow
struck robbens to the ground,
his head was masht two peses soo,
a deep and deadly wound.

12. his head and arms all broke to bits,
he in the fiar did lye,
the children scard out of their wits
aloud began two cry.
13. the elder son that yet remains,
resevd a grevous wound,
but oh, alass, poor robbens brains
did fall out on the ground.
14. thus he within the flame did lye,
the othars full of greaf,
a neighbor that did hear them cry
did run to their releaf.
15. this maid his tendar hart to ake
to see him in that case ;
he quickly hold on him did take
and drue him from that place.
16. now near the middel of the day
the neighbors thay did meat,
the corps thay quickly did convay
in to his winding sheat.
17. a frend to tinmouth took his coast
the hevey news to beair.
the tidings come to them all most
as soon as thay got their.
18. but when the parants come two know
theair son was dead indeed,
alass, their eys with tears did flow
and homwards went with spead.
19. the peopel came from every part
to see the awfull sight,
it grevd the parants tender hart,
alass, and well it might.
20. to see their one beloved son
in such a case indeed,
me thinks would make a hart of stone
or hart of steall to bleed.
21. laid in the grave two turn to dust,
their greaf what tongue can tell,
but yet, alass, the parants must
bid him a long fair well

THE SARTINTY OF DETH.

22. see, the vain race of mortal man
are but an empty shoe,
like bubbels on the water stan
and soon two nothing goo.
23. when wee are well, alas, our breth
is easy took away,
ten thousand ways a mortal deth
can turn our flesh to clay.
24. the old and young, both high and low,
must yeald their mortal breth,
when is the time wee due not know,
but all must suffer deth.
25. to conker deth if wee contrive,
it is in vain to try,
for suarly as wee are alive,
soo suarly wee must die.

FINIS.

NOVEMBER YE 20, 1773.

“This is verbatim, but I have slightly punctuated the verses. In the twentieth verse, *one* is to be pronounced *own*, while some words are almost puns in their effect.”

The rhymes on the death of the child are of a literary character, having been produced with the pen, and designed for reading. But in the early part of the century there were in circulation in New England many ballads more nearly representing a true traditional literature, circulating by word of mouth, and current in different versions. To this class belongs the following narrative, apparently of English origin : —

THE LANCASTER MAID.

Oh Betsey ! Betsey ! beauty fair !
Had lately come from Lancastair,
A servant maid let herself to be,
She was fitting for a more high degree.

The old lady had an only son,
And Betsey had his favor won ;
Saying, “Betsey, I love thee as my life,
And I do intend to make thee my wife.”

In the very next chamber the old lady lay,
And heard what her son to Betsey did say,

Then she resolvèd in her mind,
To put a stop to her son's incline.

The very next morning the old lady arose,
Calling for Betsey, "Put on your clothes,
For out of town with me you must go,
To wait upon me one day or two."

The very next morning Betsey arose.
And dressed herself in her milkwhite clothes,
Saying, "Madam ! I 'm ready to go with thee,
To wait upon you one day or three."

To a very rich merchant Betsey was bound,
To sail the ocean round and round :
"Oh welcome home, dear mother," he said,
"But where is Betsey, your servant maid ?"

"Oh son ! Oh son ! I plainly see,
There is great love between Betsey and thee,
No more, no more, for 't is all in vain,
For Betsey's a-sailing o'er the main."

Oh then these words struck her son sad !
'T was not all the world could make him glad,
In slumbering dreams he was heard to cry,
"Oh beautiful Betsey ! For thee I die." ¹

The following variant of the last stanzas attests the popularity of the song : —

For many doctors they did send,
And much upon him they did spend,
But all physicians were in vain,
For yet in love he did remain.

For many doctors they did send :
To try their skill and to try their means,
'T was not all the world could give relief,
He died out of sorrow, heartbroke with grief.

When the old lady saw her son was dead,
She pulled the hair out of her head,
Saying, "If my son could but breathe again,
I'd send for Betsey all o'er the main." ²

¹ Sung in Massachusetts about 1800. Contributed by E. S. Dixwell, Cambridge, Mass.

² Taken from the recitation of Mrs. Charles D. Davis, of West Newton, Mass., who learned it from her mother, Mrs. Ellis Allen, born in Scituate, Mass., in the year 1793.

The piece which follows has already been printed (vol. viii. p. 230) : —

THE LADY IN THE WEST.

There was a lady lived in the west,
Whose age was scarcely twenty,
And she had suitors of the best,
Both lords and squires plenty.

And she had suitors of the best,
Who daily waited upon her,
But her father's clerk she would adore,
Above those men of honor.

Her father unto her did say,
"You fond and foolish creature,
To marry with your servant slave,
So mean of form and feature.

So mean a portion shall you have,
If this is your proceeding,
To marry with your servant slave,
So mean of birth and breeding."

"It must be so, it shall be so,
Although I have offended,
For when I break a solemn vow,
Then may my life be ended."

There being a table in the room,
A pistol on it lying,
He instantly, all in a rage,
The very same let flying,

All at his youthful daughter's breast,
Who fell down dead before him,
The very last word she did express,
"I must and will adore him."¹

It has been stated that similar histories are still recited in the more isolated districts of the South. The Eastern Shore of Maryland offers a curious example ; among the "poor whites," who can neither read nor write, is sung the following ballad, which illustrates the degradation of the ballad from the time when noble damsels might don the garb of chivalry and accompany their lovers to war.

¹ Contributed by Mrs. E. Allen, West Newton, Mass. Sung about 1800.

POLLY'S LOVE.

Down in yon country a rich farmer did live (dwell),
 He had but one daughter whom he loved well,
 And as soon as he found that she was in love,
 He parted pretty Polly's own ardent true love.

As Polly lay musing all on her downy bed,
 A comical project came into her head ;
 "Neither father nor mother shall make me false prove,
 I will dress like a soldier and follow my love."

Coat, waistcoat, and breeches pretty Polly put on,
 In every degree she was dressed like a man,
 To her father's stables to view the horses around,
 To see if there was one could travel the ground.

A case of fine pistols and a sword by her side,
 With her father's best gelding like a troop she did ride,
 She had rode far before she came to a town,
 And called for the captain of Harry Wown (high renown ?).

The first that came forth was an English lord,
 And the next pretty Polly's own true love.
 "Here is a letter from Polly your friend."
 He instantly taking the letter in hand. . . .
 "And under the seal there 's a guinea to be found,
 For you and your soldiers drink Polly's health round."

Now Polly being drowsy she hung down her head,
 And calls for a candle to light her to bed.
 "There 's a light at your service, a bed at your ease,
 And you can sleep with me, kind sir, if you please."

"To sleep with a soldier 's a dangerous thing,
 For some will want soldiers to fight for the king."
 "I am a sailor on sea, and a soldier on shore,
 But the name of pretty Polly I always adore."

Early next morning pretty Polly arose,
 She dressed herself up in a suit of woman's clothes,
 And down stairs she came, saying, "Constant I will prove,
 I am pretty Polly, your own true love."

Now Polly is married, she lives at her ease,
 She goes when she will, and comes when she please,
 She left her dear parents behind to mourn,
 "I 'd give hundreds and thousands for Polly's return." ¹

¹ Contributed by Mrs. E. M. Backus, Saluda, N. C.

Another ballad also has Pretty Polly for a heroine. Perhaps the two are offshoots of a single old history ; in the song already cited the hero could be a "sailor on the sea." The version belongs to the Blue Ridge Mountains, Henderson County, North Carolina.

Poor Jack he 's gone a-sailing,
With trouble on his mind,
He has left his native country,
And his darling girl behind.
And sing oh ! and sing oh !
So fare you well my darling.

There was a rich old farmer,
In London he did dwell,
And he had an only daughter,
The truth too I will tell.

She went into a tailor's shop,
And dressed in man's array,
She enlisted with the captain,
To carry her away.

"Your waist it is too slender,
Your fingers they are too small,
Your cheeks too red and rosy,
To face the cannon ball."

"My waist it is none too slender,
My fingers they are none too small,
It will never change my countenance,
To face the cannon ball."

And when the battle was ended,
Pretty Polly marchèd around,
Among the dead and wounded,
Her darling boy she found.

And she took him in her arms,
And she carried him to the town,
And she called for some physician,
To heal his bleeding wounds.

This couple now are married,
How well they do agree,
This couple they are married,
And why not you and me ?
And sing oh ! and sing oh !
So fare you well my darling.¹

¹ Contributed by Mrs. E. M. Backus.

The next example, also from the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina (Polk County), belongs to the class of confessions of criminals, common in broadsides.

My name it is Denis, a man of high renown,
And my match in the country is hard to be found,
Is hard to be found,
And my match in the country is hard to be found.

I lived in Tennessee and there I bore the sway,
And for stealing of horses was forced to run away.

The footmen, the horsemen, they followed after me,
And straightway they carried me to the penitentiary.

And when I got over there, they welcomed me in,
They shaved off my head in the place of my chin.

They pulled off my clothes and dressed me in uniform,
Such a suit I never wore since the day I was borned.

Come all ye young horse-thieves, and warning take from me.
Never place your affections on the penitentiary.

Now I 'm getting old and my locks are getting gray,
I 'm still hammering away in the penitentiary,
In the penitentiary,
I 'm still hammering away in the penitentiary.¹

The next piece has a character religious as well as sentimental.

CREATION.

When Adam was first created,
The lord of the universe round,
His happiness was not completed,
Till he a helpmeet had found.

He 'd all things for food that was wanted,
To give him content in his life ;
He 'd horses and foxes for hunting,
Which many need more than a wife.

He 'd a garden all planted by nature,
To give him content in his life,
But an all wise Creator,
He saw that he needed a wife.

¹ Contributed by Mrs. E. M. Backus.

So Adam was placèd in a slumber,
And lost a part of his side,
When he awoke in a wonder,
And beheld a most beautiful bride.

With transports he gazèd upon her,
His happiness now was complete,
He thankèd the most bountiful owner,
Had helpèd him to a mate.

She was not taken out of his head, sir,
To rule and triumph over man,
Neither was she taken out of his feet, sir,
For man to trample upon.

But she was taken out of his side, sir,
Man's equal companion to be.
When both are united in one, sir,
How happily they do agree !

A man who lives single 's a beggar
Though all the world he possess,
If a beggar has got a good partner,
Then all things in life will be blest.

Let not woman be despisèd by man, sir,
For she is part of himself ;
And woman by Adam was prized, sir,
Far more than a globe full of wealth.¹

The humorous ballad may be represented by the following piece,
to judge by the metre not very old, but traditionally current during
the early years of the century : —

BEAUTIFUL KATIE AND THE GRAY MARE.

Young Johnny, the miller, he courted of late,
A farmer's fair daughter, called Beautiful Kate,
Whose wealth and fine fortune was full fifty pound,
Silks, ribbons, and laces, and furbelowed gowns,
Silks ribbons and laces and diamonds and pins,
With sumptuous apparel and fifty fine things.

The day was appointed, the money was told ;
It was a fine present in silver and gold.
Now Johnny unto her father then said ;
" Sir, I will not marry this beautiful maid,
Although she is virtuous, charming, and fair,
Without the addition of Tid, the gray mare."

¹ Contributed by Mrs. E. Allen. Massachusetts, about 1800.

Her father then answered young Johnny with speed ;
 " I thought you had courted my daughter indeed,
 And not the gray mare ; but since it is thus,
 My money once more I 'll put into my purse,
 And as for the bargain, I vow and declare
 I 'll keep both my daughter and Tid the gray mare."

The money then vanishèd out of his sight,
 And so did fair Katie, his joy and delight,
 And he like a woodchuck was turned out of doors (door),
 Forbidden by them to come there any more.
 Now Johnny began his locks for to tear,
 And he wished that he 'd never stood out for the mare.

About a year after, or little above,
 He chancèd to meet with Miss Katie, his love.
 Said he, " My dear Katie, do not you know me ? "
 " If I mistake not, I have seen you," said she,
 " Or one of your likeness, with long yellow hair,
 That once came a-courting to father's gray mare."

" 'Twas not to the mare a-courting I came,
 But only to you, my love, Katie by name,
 Not thinking your father would make a dispute,
 But giving with Katie the gray mare to boot ;
 But rather than lose such a dutiful son, —
 Well, it 's over, — and I 'm sorry for what I have done."

" Your sorrow," says Katie, " I value it not,
 There are young men enough in this world to be got,
 And surely that gal must be at her last prayer,
 Who would marry a man that once courted a mare.
 And as for the prize, I think it not great,
 So fare you well, Johnny ; go mourn for your fate." ¹

The physician furnishes almost as congenial a theme for satire as
 as does the miller.

OLD DOCTOR GREY.

" Mr. A, friend B is sick,
 Call the doctor and be quick."
 The doctor comes with right good will,
 And never forgets his calomel.

He takes his patient by the hand,
 Compliments him as a man,
 Sets him down his pulse to feel,
 And then deals out his calomel.

¹ Contributed by E. S. Dixwell, Cambridge, Mass. Sung about 1820.

His high silk stock around his neck,
With old Scotch snuff is always specked,
His nankeen vest and ruffled frill,
Smells of jalap, aloes, and calomel.

He rides about in an old green chaise,
And doses patients night and day,
While many an unreceipted bill
Shows right much loss in calomel.

His good wife seldom leaves the house,
But labors for her faithful spouse,
She cooks his food and makes his pills,
With seven grains of calomel.

At last the good old doctor died,
And was mourned by people far and wide,
Yet strange to tell, when he was ill,
He would not take his calomel.¹

It has been observed that, of the historical ballads formerly current in New England, some have been printed. Among these is especially to be mentioned the song of Lovewell's Fight, which is said to have been in its day "the most beloved song in New England." Of this ballad two versions were published in "Collections, Historical and Miscellaneous," by J. Farmer and J. B. Moore, Concord, 1824, vol. ii. pp. 64 and 94. The first and oldest of these recounts with considerable spirit the events of the combat in 1725 : —

Of worthy Captain Lovewell I purpose now to sing,
How valiantly he served his country and his king ;
He and his valiant soldiers did range the woods full wide,
And hardships they endured to quell the Indians' pride.

'T was nigh unto Pigwacket, on the eighth day of May,
They spied a rebel Indian soon after break of day ;
He on a bank was walking, upon a neck of land,
Which leads into a pond, as we're to understand.

"Our valiant English," as the song calls Lovewell's men, see an Indian, whom they approach with caution, fearing ambush ; however, the Indian shoots Lovewell and another, but is himself shot down in his flight.

Then, having scalped the Indian, they went back to the spot,
Where they had laid their packs down, but there they found them not ;
For the Indians having spied them, when they them down did lay,
Did seize them for their plunder, and carry them away.

¹ Sung in New Berne, N. C., about 1800. Contributed by Mrs. E. M. Backus.

The "Indian rebels" appear from their lurking-place, and a battle ensues, which lasts all day, in which eighteen out of thirty-four English are killed, while the Pequot Paugus is slain and his band defeated. The chaplain particularly distinguishes himself in the action : —

Our worthy Captain Lovewell among them there did die ;
They killed Lieutenant Robbins, and wounded good young Frye,
Who was our English chaplain : he many Indians slew,
And some of them he scalped when bullets round him flew.

A version of the second ballad relating to the same action was communicated to the editor of this Journal by James Russell Lowell ; but it differs from that printed by Farmer only in the order of the verses, and indeed seems to be a rearrangement of the latter. The ballad is very literary in character, and according to the opinion of Dr. Samuel A. Green, Librarian of the Massachusetts Historical Society, is probably a composition of the early part of the nineteenth century.

Here may also be mentioned a manuscript ballad relating to events of 1755, printed in the "Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society," April and May, 1894. The writer, who composed in the same year, regarded the occurrences of the twelvemonth as a sign that the Judgment Day was at hand.

And Now, O Land, New England Land,
Amased be & trembling Stand,
Because the Judge Stands at the Door ;
Forsake your sins, repent therefore.

After the preceding pages had been written, a friend pointed out that the ballad "On Springfield Mountain," mentioned by Dr. Beauchamp, in a form made intentionally more absurd, was included by John Phoenix (pseudonym of George H. Derby) in "Squibob Papers," New York, 1865, pp. 45-52. The introductory lines are nearly the same.

On Springfield Mounting there did dwell
A likely youth, I knowed him well ;
Leftenant Carter's only son,
A comely youth, nigh twenty-one.

The ballad itself, I am told, is still remembered, and survives as a comic song. No doubt, therefore, it will hereafter be possible to present a complete version.

William Wells Newell.